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ABSTRACT

One teacher's experience with traditional language tests suggested that the tests did not reflect the kind of communicative language learning going on in the classroom and might be counterproductive. As a result, an experiment in oral testing was undertaken in which examinees were required to process natural discourse and to relate language to contexts outside the classroom, according to the theory of John Oller. Subjects were economics students in their fourth year of English language study in an Italian university. Guidelines for the oral test were given to the students and discussed in class. Analysis of the test results and testing process provided information about the following: (1) the occurrence of spontaneous language exchanges; (2) structure of responses; (3) the making of inferences and predictions about the language; (4) negotiation of meaning; (5) the kinds of rhetorical acts appearing in the responses of the examinees; (6) the effects of interaction with peers during the test; (7) examinee participation and motivation; (8) self-correction; (9) the effect of making the examinees responsible for the content of the test; and (10) the examiner's role. (MSE)

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ORAL TESTING:
ASSESSING THE LANGUAGE LEARNER'S ABILITY TO PROCESS DISCOURSE

1985 C.I.S.U.
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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago a basic dissatisfaction with old ways of language testing which seemed inappropriate for the kind of learning that was going on in my own classroom led me to develop an interest in communicative testing. So much of what students had been asked to do on the old tests was totally unrelated to the kinds of things people do with language in real life. Skills were artificially separated, language elements isolated, and possible responses severely circumscribed. In my experience these tests often had a negative effect on learning and tended to alienate students rather than involve them with language. In addition, they told teachers too little about students' overall ability to use the language.

Researching and experimenting with new ways of testing has forced me to reflect a good deal on what it means to know a language and on how that core of language knowledge can be tapped for testing purposes. In the first part of this text I summarize some of the readings which have given me the greatest insight. In the second part I describe a testing experiment which I carried out in an attempt to apply what I had learned. I conclude by examining some of the recent research in second language acquisition which I feel has important implications for testing.

Noted testing expert John Oller (1979) has said:

> Instead of trying to construct a language test that will "representatively" or "rationally sample" the universe of "language", we should simply construct a test that requires the language learner to do what native speakers do with discourse (perhaps any discourse will do). Then the interpretation of the test is related not to the particular discourse that we happened to select, nor even to the universe of possible discourses in the sense of sampling theory. But thus it is related to the efficiency of the learner's internalized grammatical system in processing the discourse. The validity of the test is related to how well it enables us to predict the learner's performance in other discourse processing tasks (p. 186).

1. LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

1.1 The nature of language

Oller's (1979) position on language testing is closely related to his views on language learning. He stresses at one and the same time both the complexity/novelty of language and its predictability. Natural language, he says, is a complex organization of "sequences of classes of elements and hierarchies of them" (p. 24). On a lower level, sounds or letters combine to form words; on a higher level words are ordered into phrases, which are in turn ordered into sentences, which make up paragraphs, which form a discourse. At each higher level, forms combine to create new meanings. Drawing from Chomsky, Oller explains that the very complexity of the organization allows for a great number of possible combinations so that any particular sentence that is uttered has probably been invented at that moment. Except for ritual verbal patterns or formulaic expressions, most sentences have not been heard before and memorized.

However, there are limits to the creativity allowed by language as it must conform to the constraints of grammar and logic. For one who knows the language it is always possible to predict partial-

ly what will come next in any given sequence of elements. This power to predict is based not only on linguistic knowledge but also on knowledge of the world, for there is a systematic relationship between utterance and human experience outside of language. It is this systematic relationship which constitutes the psychological reality of language and which makes it predictable. Indeed, it is the basis for communication in a language and what makes language learning possible.

1.2. Normal language use

Two major kinds of context are important in the normal use of language: the linguistic context and the extralinguistic context. Oller (1979) describes the first as "the verbal and gestural aspects of language in use" (p. 18) and the second as "states of affairs constituted by things, events, people, ideas, relationships, feelings, perceptions, memories, etc." (p. 19). He points out that there is an important parallel between the normal use of language and the learning of language; for when language is used to express meaning in context, it becomes possible for the learner to infer the connections that exist between linguistic forms and reality [1]. In other words, when the facts of reality as we all understand them are made apparent at the same time as a new text is introduced, the text will have meaning for the learner. And meaningful verbal material is easier to learn as it can more readily be incorporated into the learner's pre-existing network of knowledge. For Oller, language learning involves the construction and modification of an appropriate "expectancy grammar", where "grammar" refers not only to the way in which a language is organized, but also to the way in which utterances in that language are "pragmatically mapped onto contexts outside of language and vice-versa (that is, the way contexts are mapped onto utterances)" (p. 24).

The close connection between the normal use of language and

[1] For a discussion of how children learn a first language, see Bloom and Lahey (1978), Shatz (1977) and Smith (1975).

the learning of language has too often been ignored in language teaching. This may account, at least in part, for the general dissatisfaction with the results of classroom language learning. Criticisms have been leveled both at teaching approaches and techniques [2] and at the materials developed for use in the teaching of languages [3].

Widdowson and Brumfit (1981) have accused language teachers of teaching language as a system for future use and neglecting the role of genuine meaning. They point out that in real language use there is no separation between concept and expression, between grammar and semantics, and that normal language typically draws on external knowledge for its meaning. Teachers, they say, have too often adopted the sentence as the basic teaching unit although sentences are units of linguistic analysis, not of natural language use. If a foreign language is to be used for communication purposes, learners of that language must be able to participate in discourse, which requires them to cope with utterances, not isolated sentences. In discourse language is used to extend situational information so that the meaning of an utterance has to be inferred by referring to situational factors which complement the information it expresses. In fact, the meaning of an utterance can vary depending on the context or situation which extends it.

> Sentences signal their own meaning because they are units of analysis; utterances do not because they are units of behavior and depend on human agency to derive meaning from them. And it is precisely the ability to derive meaning by extension that constitutes the communicative use of language (p. 202).

Widdowson and Brumfit see the real problem in language teaching as the failure to prepare learners for utterance extension in discourse.

[2] See Robert Blair's criticisms of conventional methods of language teaching (1982).

[3] See Madsen and Bowen (1969) for a discussion of the discrepancy between the way language is used in language textbooks and language use in the real world.

1.3. Discourse processing

Oller (1984) too stresses the importance of preparing language learners to deal with discourse. He criticizes the textbooks used in the teaching of English for not taking the world of discourse seriously. Like Widdowson and Brumfit, he points out that in real life the situation elicits the text. Ordinary communication, says Oller, is typically motivated by conflict, by some element of misunderstanding, disequilibrium or surprise which language serves to resolve. The speaker is an agent acting on a plan moving toward a goal. He accuses language teaching textbooks of using language which is too often unmotivated in that it does not arise from a need to communicate and unstructured in that it violates our commonplace expectancies about the way things are [4].

Authentic discourse on the other hand requires participants to draw on previously acquired knowledge to make inferences and predictions. This is so because the production and comprehension of discourse involve going beyond what is given in the text:

> Whenever we say anything at all we leave a great deal more unsaid. We depend largely for the effect of our communications not only on what we say but also on the creative ability of our listeners to fill in what we have left unsaid. The fact is that a normal listener supplies a great deal of information by creative inference and in a very important sense is always anticipating what the speaker will say next. Similarly, the speaker is always anticipating what the listener will infer and is correcting his output on the basis of feedback received from the listener (p. 20).

Oller maintains that the development of discourse processing skill is central to child language learning, and that teaching a person another language is basically a problem of teaching him or her to process discourse in that other language. For this reason, Oller says, "if the teaching methods focus on relations between

[4] See Oller (1985: 154) on recent texts based on the notional/functional syllabus which lack episodic structure and motivation.

surface forms without making it possible for the learner to discover the relationship between discourse and the contexts of discourse, they are bound to fail" (p. 407). In the same way, "the ultimate criterion for the validity of language tests is the extent to which they reliably assess the ability of examinees to process discourse" (p. 405) or, in Oller's own definition of things, "the efficiency of the pragmatic expectancy grammar the learner is in the process of constructing" (p. 32). It follows then that a discourse processing task should mirror what people normally do when using language in natural contexts. "If a proposed task does not require processing that involves relating discourse to contexts of experience outside the lingusitic forms per se, then the task cannot legitimately be called a language test in the normal sense of the word 'language'" (p. 407). Two closely interrelated criteria of construct validity that Oller would impose on language tests are: 1) that they cause the learner "to process temporal sequences of elements in the language that conform to normal contextual constraints"; and 2) that they require the learner "to understand the systematic correspondences of linguistic contexts and extralinguistic contexts" (p. 34).

2. THE TEST

2.1. Background

This text describes an experiment in oral testing and attempts to interpret the resulting data in the light of Oller's work, from which it took its inspiration. In accordance with what was suggested by Oller, the two main criteria for the test were: 1) to require examinees to process natural discourse and 2) to get them to relate language to contexts outside of language. The examinees were Italian students in the Faculty of Economics and Business at L.U.I.S.S. (Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali di Roma) who had just completed their third or fourth year of English at the University. Some of them were "real beginners" when they entered the program and had learned all the English they knew in their English courses at L.U.I.S.S. Others were what is known as "false beginners" when they started the program. Although they had had anywhere from one to five years of scholastic English prior to university, at the time of enrollment they were unable to use the language and so were placed in a low level group. All of them had reached an intermediate level of linguistic competency in all four skills (speaking, understanding the spoken language, reading and writing). The same teacher had taught the courses in both the third and fourth years. Each course had met twice a week for two hours each time. In both courses equal time had been spent on improving general language skills and on developing students' ability to read on topics related to their field of study. Teaching methodology, materials and classroom activities in both courses were congruent with a communicative approach. The oral examination described here was administered at the end of the academic year 1983-84 to measure the language proficiency of students in both courses.

2.2. Problems in oral testing

Oral examinations are part and parcel of the Italian academic system from elementary school through university. Unfortunately,

foreign language examinations have most often been handled in the same way as all the others. Yet language testing is different in that it does not require the testing of a specific content area: "Languages are not content subjects, like history or physics; they are symbol systems and the great thing to learn about symbol systems is how to manipulate them, not to analyze them" (Brown in Moffett 1983). Requiring students to demonstrate knowledge about a language cannot be considered a valid measure of their ability to function in the language.

As a result of the work done by the Council of Europe,[1] which has been highly publicized and accompanied by a barrage of commercial materials purporting to embody a notional-functional approach to language teaching , the focus in the field is now on integrative, pragmatic, performance-oriented testing, where "integrative" refers to tests which look at language globally instead of trying to separate out discrete points, "pragmatic" implies a simulated or actual communicative context, and "performance-oriented" means that examinees are asked to use what they know.[2] Where this kind of approach to language testing has been adopted, the examiner in an oral examination situation typically attempts to obtain a language sample for the purpose of evaluating the examinee's ability to use the language. Sometimes the examiner tries to elicit specific vocabulary items and grammatical structures. The problem with this is that the more closed the test is and the less autonomy examinees have in working out their own responses, the more the language produced tends to be stilted and unnatural. What is worse, tests which are too structured typically put examinees in a kind of strait-jacket since they seldom feel free to go beyond what is asked for even though they may be quite capable of doing so.

The problems are less obvious where the format of the test is more open. While role playing, telling a story from pictures or

[1] For a more detailed discussion see van Ek and Trim (1984) and Wilkins (1976).

[2] See Cohen (1980) for an American presentation of the case for using tests which assess "functional language ability in real or simulated communicative situations" (p. 12).

performing some other kind of task are test formats which can allow examinees greater freedom in expressing themselves, they nevertheless require examinees to elaborate on something which originated with someone else and is not their own or to imagine a context which may have no real meaning for them. Furthermore, as anyone who has done a lot of oral testing knows, specific testing techniques, such as role playing, work well with some students and not all with others.

Even in the more flexible context of the oral interview, examinees often find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being questioned on a subject that has been imposed on them by the examiner and which they had no real opportunity to prepare for, either psychologically or linguistically. They may or may not be familiar with or interested in discussing the topic chosen by the examiner and may even feel that the examiner is not really interested in what they have to say or, worse still, already knows the answer to what is being asked. The result is too often a limited, superficial exchange which gives the examiner little real basis for an evaluation. While the rationale usually given for such a testing procedure is that it allows the examiner to get a sample of spontaneous language from the examinee in a more naturalistic context, the actual effect is often quite the opposite in that examinees feel inhibited and may very well produce less language and less real language than they would otherwise be capable of. The individual personalities of examinees, their images of themselves as speakers of the foreign language, their relationship with or impressions of the examiner, and their acquaintance (or lack of it) with the specific vocabulary items they might need to understand the examiner fully or to express what they have to say on a given topic may all become important factors in determining actual output, particularly at less advanced levels. The interviewing skills of the examiners, their ability to draw out the examinees and intuit points of real interest to them become crucial. In the best of circumstances, most examinees still do not feel free to initiate or to ask questions, both of which are part of normal communication.[3]

[3] See Lado (1978) on the inherent artificiality of the teacher-student

With all of these testing procedures elicitation can become a major problem, particularly in an open examination system like the Italian one where students frequently listen in on each other's examinations and where keeping the content of the examinations fresh and making it real to each individual examinee can tax the imagination of even the most skilful examiners. Finding out what individual examinees feel comfortable with doing or what they might be interested in discussing and then getting them to do it or talk about it can become a Herculean task that drains examiners rapidly as testing becomes overly demanding and inevitably uneven.

2.3. Rationale for the test

The extent to which examinees feel motivated to communicate and the degree to which they are willing to engage in discourse with the other person or persons during the test will have an important influence on the authenticity of the resulting language exchange. "The authenticity of the test may be lessened by the choice of theme for the test, the respondent's preoccupation with obtaining a good grade, the lack of rapport between the respondent and the tester and by a variety of other factors" (Shohamy and Cohen 1984). There is some question as to whether a test can ever really be called authentic as any test is artificial by definition. Assuming nevertheless that tests can be more or less authentic, let us examine in greater detail the essential ingredients for communication. Moffett (1980) describes the basis for discourse as "the drama of somebody with something to say to somebody else" (p. 12). From the point of view of the person doing the communicating this means having a "what", which refers to content, and a "what for", which includes the person's motivation, his or her audience and how he or she wants to act on that audience. Obviously, the communicative context is distorted in the typical school setting where the "what" is assigned and the "what for"

interview and Goody (1978) on the difficulty of establishing real communication with a person in a well-defined authority role.

consists in an external requirement to be met. If in addition the audience is the English teacher, to whom the student is less likely to have something to say, then the chances for real communication to take place are slim indeed.

In at least one expert's view, it is important for interaction to take place between "communicants who are equal and whose relation is reversible" (Moffett 1980: 12). Accordingly, the following recommendation is given for teaching writing in school:

> While acknowledging that artificiality cannot be eliminated completely from the classroom situation, somehow we must create more realistic communication "dramas" in which the student can practice being a first and second person (i.e.a. speaker-writer and listener-reader) with better motivation and in a way more closely resembling how he will have to read, write, speak and listen in the "afterlife". I recommend training the student to write for the class group, which is the nearest thing to a contemporary world-at-large (pag. 12).

The findings of research in second language acquisition also point to the importance of peers, in this case as the speaker models preferred by language learners (Dulay and Burt 1977). There is evidence of other concrete benefits that may derive from engaging in conversations in the Target Language with peers. In one study it was found that Non-Native Speaker interaction involved a greater number and variety of rhetorical acts than Native Speaker — Non-Native Speaker interaction where the Native Speaker was the teacher (reported in Larsen-Freeman 1983). Other findings suggest that NSs skilled in talking with foreigners tend to intervene and resolve any communication breakdown for them; consequently, NNSs can gain more practice in negotiating to restore meaning when they are communicating with each other (reported in Larsen-Freeman 1983).

The oral test under study here was conceived as a way of obtaining a language sample which more closely approximates the way language is used in normal communication. It was designed to allow the examinees to invest in a topic, and to interact with peers, playing the roles of both speaker and listener. The examinees

were asked to choose a subject of interest to them and to be prepared to discuss it with other examinees on the day of the examination. It was hoped that with three or four of them participating in an examination at the same time, each having chosen a topic to talk to the others about, a kind of round table discussion would materialize during which spontaneous language exchanges which held real meaning for the participants would occur. There would be a commission of three examiners, as required by law in the Italian university system, one the classroom teacher and the other two teachers of other courses. The basic responsibility of the examiners would be to evaluate the linguistic competency of each examinee.

2.4. Procedure

During the last week of classes students in both courses were given copies of the following guidelines for the oral examination:

> You should come to the Oral Examination with *something to say about a specific topic*. During the examination you will tell some of your classmates why you chose the topic and give them information about it that you think they probably do not have. They must be able to follow what you say so be clear and simple and if you need to introduce any specialized terminology, be prepared to explain exactly what it means. It is a good idea to make an outline of the points you want to cover and to be familiar with the basic vocabulary you will need to discuss your topic. However, you should try to formulate sentences that are your own *while* you are speaking. (Do *not* memorize a text that is not yours. No one will understand you!)
>
> Some suggestions for topics are the following:
>
> 1) *Description of a graph or graphs*. Explain what the graph shows, describe the movement in the various periods, and discuss what the causes and the consequences might be.
>
> 2) *Work experience*. This could be related to a "stage" you did through L.U.I.S.S. Give general information about the company you worked for and specific information about what you did there.

Discuss what you think you learned from the experience and how you think it will be helpful to you in your future career.

3) *The subject of your thesis.* Discuss what you are going to do and how, and why you chose this subject.

4) *Any topic related to economics and business.* Choose something that you find interesting. Keep it simple. You can define, compare, discuss causes and effects, etc., but be sure you have clear in your own mind what it is you want to communicate.

5) *A special interest you have.* Talk about how you developed this interest and in what way it has influenced your life.

6) *An interesting or unusual experience.* Tell the story of what happened and explain why it was significant.

To make what you say more interesting, you are encouraged to use any diagrams, pictures, photos, etc., which might help you to explain. You should plan to talk for about *ten minutes.*[4]

These guidelines were discussed on the last day of class in both courses. The teacher explained that the reason for setting up the test this way was to give students the opportunity to demonstrate how well they could use the English they knew. They were warned that if they spoke about something too complicated it would probably be beyond their own linguistic competency to discuss and beyond the ability of the other students to understand. On the other hand, if what they had to say was uninteresting or common knowledge they would not do well on the examination either.

Then the teacher put the criteria that the examiners would use to evaluate students' performance during the test on the blackboard and that was discussed. The four criteria for evaluating (two of them content-related and two of them performance-related) were: Quantity of Communication, defined as the amount of relevant information that the student succeeded in conveying; Quality of Communication, defined as the complexity and appropriateness of the student's utterances; Accuracy, defined as the correctness of the student's utterances; and Fluency, defined as overall

[4] Third year students, for whom the examination was unofficial and did not determine the final mark for English, were asked to plan to speak for five minutes.

smoothness, continuity and naturalness of the student's speech (adapted from Bartz 1979). Both the test and the criteria were formulated to place the onus on the students to produce the most and the best English they were capable of. In general, student response was positive as students felt there was something concrete they could do to prepare for the examination. "A test is like a game for which the participants should know the rules and act accordingly if they wish to perform well" (Spolsky as summarized in Shohamy and Cohen 1984).

The day of the examination three or four students were chosen at random by the teacher-examiner to be tested together. They were asked to form a semi-circle opposite the three examiners and to sit so that they would also be able to see and, hopefully, to interact with one another. The group being examined were expected to decide amongst themselves who would speak first, second, third, etc. They were instructed to talk to each other and were told that they would each be held responsible for any information given by the others. They were encouraged to interrupt the person who was speaking at any given moment if they needed clarification or confirmation. They were told that the examiners would evaluate them not only on the basis of what they said about their own topics but also on how well they were able to participate in any discussion of another examinee's topic that might arise within the group. The examiners had agreed beforehand to leave as much space as possible to the examinees and to join in only where they had a real question or a contribution to make to the discussion. All of the examinations were taperecorded.

2.5. Results

A total of 32 examinees (27 males, 4 females) were tested during three separate examination sessions with the following breakdown into groups: 6 groups composed of 3 examinees each; 3 groups of 4 examinees each; and one instance in which only 2 examinees were examined together. The examiner who was also the classroom teacher was present at all 3 sessions while the other

2 examiners were the same for the first two sessions and different for the third session, so that a total of 5 examiners were involved.

Out of a total number of 32 examinees, 14 (almost half) chose to talk about a graph, either drawing one on the blackboard or showing one they had found or copied. The subjects of the graphs were as follows: world tobacco sales, inflation and GNP in Italy, the examinee's scholastic record at this university, sales of tea in the U.S. from 1974 to 1980, trends in motor bike sales in connection with their uses, the inflation level in Italy between 1974 and 1984, unemployment in the U.S., company profits, sales and profits in the Italian steel industry, the relationship between prices and unemployment, investments in Italy from 1870 to 1970, and the effect of restrictive monetary policy on inflation. Only two examinees described graphs that were very similar to ones that had been used in class (world tobacco sales and company profits), changing only the numbers involved. The other examinees were able to apply the economics vocabulary they had acquired and the general concepts they had learned to express in English to real situations by choosing graphs that allowed them to give explanations for or to make hypotheses about specific trends or relationships (e.g. inflation and GNP in Italy, sales of tea in the U.S., etc.). A few examinees even managed to apply their technical knowledge to a subject of personal interest to them (the graph of marks earned in various university subjects by an examinee who was a notoriously undisciplined student and had only recently begun to apply himself; trends in motor bike sales described by an examinee with a great deal of interest in and information about motor bikes; the annual sales pattern in the company where an examinee was employed; falling sales and profits in the Italian steel industry described by an examinee whose father owned a steel mill in Brescia).

The other 18 examinees (a little more than half) chose either to discuss a subject of economic or general interest which they had read about or to speak from personal experience about something they had done or something that had happened to them or about a special interest they had which they felt knowledgeable about: inflation in Italy (government, the private sector and international relations), advertising, "my father's business", astrology,

foreign players on Italian soccer teams, hunger in the world, a short history of FIAT, the Juventus football club, work experience on the island of Jersey, story of how the examinee became a football referee, the examinee's experience living in an agrarian community, the examinee's plans to visit England, "my passion for animals", "my city, Catania", the importance literature can have in a person's life, the examinee's interest in practising sports, "a dangerous experience", and an adventure in a fishing boat.

The average time spent on each topic was between 15 and 20 minutes so that an hour or so was needed to examine a group of 4 examinees. On several occasions the teacher-examiner had to intervene to end a discussion that went on past the allotted time so as to guarantee that each examinee would have a chance to introduce and discuss the topic she or he had prepared. The overall impression of all five examiners was that examinees talked more with less prompting on a greater range of topics than in a typical formal examination where the examiners choose the content area and function as the examinee's only interlocutors. Moreover, it was felt that a larger portion of the time examinees spent talking was characterized by realistic language exchanges, both examinee-examinee and examinee-examiner, than is usually the case. Examinees tended to be active, attentive, enthusiastic and creative, and the examiners all commented on how interesting the examinations were and how easy it was to sit through them.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

3.1. Spontaneous language exchanges

Let us now examine the data that was collected to see what kind of language examinees actually produced. First of all, did spontaneous language exchanges occur?

1) *S1* describes a graph showing tobacco sales, which he has drawn on the blackboard:*

S1: From 1981 to 1982 sales decreased because of... prices goes up and the demand of tobacco decrease because... Do you understand?

S2: Yes.

S1: Because the normal connection between demand and prices is... prices and demand... If prices go up, the demand...

S2: Decline.

S1: goes down. And if the prices... if prices go down the demand increase.

S2: So at higher price... the demand... there is a lower demand.

S1: Yes.

2) *S1 has just finished talking about his visit to an agrarian community:*

S2: Where is the community?

S1: The community is in Massafra.

T2: Where?

S1: Massafra... near Taranto... in the country... naturally.

* In the presentation of the data S = Student/Examinee and T = Teacher/Examiner; S1 is always the Student/Examinee who introduced the topic under discussion, while the other Student/Examinees are numbered according to the order in which they intervened; T1 always refers to the Examiner who is also the students' classroom teacher, while the other Teacher/Examiners are numbered according to the order in which they participated in the discussion.

They don't have... (*aside to one of the other student/examinees*) Luce... come si dice?

S2: Light.

S1: the light.

T1: Electricity.

S1: They stand up and we stand up at 5 o'clock in the morning and go to sleeping at 8, 9 o'clock. They live as the farmer in the begin... the century... in 19... 10.

S3: I know a community near Lecce.

S1: I don't know this community.

S3: And many boys... came to spend... holidays in this community.

S1: Is an agrarian community?

S3: Yes.

3) *S1 has been talking about his academic record at the university:*

S2: Do you think that you'll end the examinations next year?

S1: I hope.

S2: What... how many examinations you will do?

S1: Or 16 or 17.

S2: Next year.

S1: No, for all 3 years. In this year I think 7.

4) *S1 has been talking about the various sports she practised in the small town where she lives before she began studying at the university:*

S2: How many time is necessary for to play tennis good?

S1: In the summer I play 2, 3 hours for day.

T1: A day? Everyday?

S1: Everyday. But when I'm studying in Rome I don't play.

S3: During the university is impossible to play tennis.

S1: I don't have a car in Rome and the time.

S3: You play tennis with boys?

S1: With?

S3: Boys.
T1: Not only girls but also boys?
S1: I prefer play tennis with my instructor because... I learn.
T3: Is your instructor a man or a woman?
S1: A man... a boy.
T1: How old is he?
S1: He... 24, 26 years.
S3: It's her boyfriend.
T1: You think it's her boyfriend?
S1: No.

5) *S1 has told the others about the company where she works:*
S2: How much time do you need for arrive in this factory?
S1: I employ about an half hour.
T1: Not bad. It takes you longer maybe to come to the university. *(to S2)* How long does it take you?
S2: About 2 hour.
T1: Two hours!
S2: About.
T1: From where?
S2: Anzio.
T1: Everyday.
S2: Yes.
S3: 80 kilometers.
S2: 60.
S4: But you take the underground... for come in the university?
S2: The train and the bus.

3.2. Language that is motivated.

There are other important questions which the data should help to answer. For example, was the language used during the

test real? Was it (conflict) motivated (Oller 1984)? Did it resolve some doubt, problem or disequilibrium?

6) *S1 has talked about his passion for animals and about wild animals he has domesticated:*

S2: But there aren't negative consequently for many animals?

S1: No, the animals... si abituano. They are used to and can have a beautiful influence on the man.

S3: Do you think to buy other animals?

S1: I hope to breed a tiger.

T2: But you must have two tigers before you can breed them. Do you have a tiger?

S1: No, but in the future I hope I can have a tiger.

T3: Aren't you afraid?

S1: No. There are many people who have a tiger in captivity.

7) *S1 has chosen to speak about inflation:*

S1: What's the inflation first? Inflation is an increase of nominal prices so in the long time... long period isn't constant because the real rates are constant. But in short time period is a constant because the real rates aren't constant. In the country for example there are many debitors and many creditors and the debits are constant in the time...

S2: Nominal... nominal, because are different.

S1: Yes, yes. Nominal debits are constant. So the inflation is positive for debitors but not for creditors because...

S2: Why?

S1: Because the real value of the debits will be less than before with the inflation but... the nominal... because the nominal value is constant during the time. This is about privates... about relations between privates. But there are many effects also between the State... the government and the privates because there is for example public spending and so... when...

S2: Also taxes.

S1: Yes, also taxes but not only taxes, for example, public spending.

8) *S1 has just told S2 about his personality on the basis of his astrological sign:*

S3: You didn't prepare my horoscope?

S1: Please?

T1: (*to S3*) *Did* you or *would* you?

S3: Did you prepare.

T1: He's preparing your horoscope?

S3: Yes.

S1: She asked me to cast her horoscope.

S3: I give him my date.

T1: Also the exact time.

S3: Yes, the exact time of my birth.

S1: (*to S2*) Do you know your birth hours?

S2: In morning I think, but I don't know.

9) *S1 is talking about the 1980 Olympic Games:*

S2: Do you agree with the decision of Jimmy Carter?

S1: My opinion... I don't agree with Jimmy Carter because for me is important to respect the feeling of the idea... the feeling of Olympic Games. In this case if a country that don't go to Olympic Games because there are political interests that are... many important... there are too important, is not... is a very bad decision for me.

S3: Excuse me. What did you think... it will possible to do something for the next days... for the next years... about for example help this competition?

S1: The problem is this. Next games have to stay in a country that is not a Russian country or United States country because one of these... one of them... one of these don't go to Olympic Games. And for me is important to choose a country that are not a Russian or not a United States country.

3.3. Language that is structured

Did the text that was created respect Oller's logic of facts (1984)? Was it structured so that it did not violate common expectations about the way things are? Did it reflect the speaker's experience, that is, was she or he relating language to personal experience outside of language?

10) *S1, who is describing a graph he has drawn on the blackboard, is faced with a visible truth which he is required to match in his language:*

S1: From 196_... 76 and 1977 sales of tobacco increased.

11) *S1 has been telling the others about his hometown, Catania:*

S2: How many habitants there are in Catania?

S1: About 5,000.

T1: (*to S2*) How many?

S2: 5,000.

T1: (*to S1*) You want to write it?

(*S1 writes number on the blackboard and then reads it.*)

S1: 500,000.

12) *S1 has just explained that FIAT sales decreased during the Second World War:*

T1: Why did sales go down?

S1: Yes.

T1: If they made vehicles for the military.

S1: Went down.

T2: (*to S1*) You're saying that the production of *cars* was reduced.

S1: Of cars.

T1: Oh, okay... not FIAT, *cars*.

S1: Yes.

S2: That is the graph of sales for public.

13) *S1 is describing a graph that shows tea sales in the U.S. from 1974 to 1983:*

S1: But I think that sales of... use of tea is... or was... for me less diffuse that Great Britain for example.

T2: Yes, it is.

S1: In USA there are other drinks, for example, beer.

T1: Not for breakfast.

S1: Va bene però I think il consumo... come si dice "il consumo"?

T2: Consumption.

S1: The consumption of beer in the U.S.A. was more than Great Britain.

T1: Really?

T3: The population is higher. Are you talking now about per capita consumption or total consumption?

S1: Total.

T3: Well, total consumption is more because the population of the U.S. is so much greater than Britain's.

14) *S1 has just told the group about the negative experience he had in London which he does not want to repeat during his upcoming trip to Britain:*

T1: So you're going to your parents' friends'... your mother's friends' in Scotland?

S1: No, I think London.

T1: But didn't you say... (*turns to the other examinees*) Didn't he say... What did he say about London before? (*turns to S2*) Do you remember?

S2: He says that he don't want to go in London because he's a great city and you... he can't meet people.

S1: But I have 2 friends in London.

15) *S1 has been describing a graph which shows world tobacco sales:*

T1: Why did the price of tobacco go up? Do you know the reason?

S1: Yes. The prices from 1981 and 1982 go up because there is a big inflation. And inflation increase... increased prices.

But inflation decreased.... no... with... yes... decreased real wages of people. And people... because real wages are decreased... were decreased by inflation... couldn't have enough money to buy... cigarettes or tobacco. And in this situation demand decreased. And also sales.

T1: (*turning to S2, who has not been following*) Do you think that's true? That if the price goes up people stop smoking? Or they buy fewer cigarettes? What do you think?

S2: (*confused and obviously hoping to discourage further questioning*) Yes, I think.

T1: Do you smoke?

S2: Uh, yes.

T1: You do? And if the price goes up you don't buy cigarettes? (*Silence*)

S2: Uh... when the price of tobacco go up... also the cigarettes... the price of the cigarettes go up.

T1: And what do you do if the price of cigarettes goes up? (*Silence*)

T1: What do *you* do?

S2: (*finally involved in the logic of the exchange*) Ah... I continue to smoke.
(*General laughter*)

T1: Very realistic.

3.4. Making inferences and predictions

During the test, did examinees draw on already acquired exepctancies, both about the language and about the way things are, in order to predict and infer in the foreign language as they would normally in their native language? To find out, the examiner sometimes asked them to use what they knew to anticipate what they were likely to hear next or to evaluate or go beyond what had already been said.

16) *S1 has drawn a graph on the board but has not labeled it yet:*

S1: My graph is... describes disoccupation in United States.
T1: Disoccupation?
S1: Unemployment.
T1: Uh-huh. (*to the other 3 examinees, who do not appear to be following*) Did you hear the subject of the graph? (*to S2*) What is it? What does the graph show?
S2: The graph show disoccupation... employment.
T1: Not employment.
S2: Unemployment.
T1: Where?
S2: Uh...
T1: Can you imagine?
S2: In England.
T1: What's another possibility?
S2: Europe.
T1: Another possibility?
S2: America.
(*S1 has just finished describing his graph, which shows that in the U.S. unemployment is higher among black workers than among white workers.*)
S1: I think that this graph we can... applicarlo...
T1: Apply.
S1: in every state.
T1: Every state? In the United States?
S1: Anche in Italia.
T1: Country... in every country.
S1: Every country, yes.
T1: (*referring to the two curves on the graph*) In Italy, who is this and who is this?
S1: We must change subject.
T1: Okay, change it. Italy. What does it represent? Level of unemployment. Who is white and who is black?
S1: Ten percent level of unemployment in Italy.

T1: Yes, but imagine this difference.

S2: In this graph the first curve, the lower curve, can represent the Southern population.

T1: Lower or higher?

S2: Lower.

T1: Unemployment.

S2: Unemployment.

T1: Not employment, unemployment.

S2: Disoccupazione.

T1: Yes.

S2: The lower curve can represent the Southern population.

T1: There's less unemployment in the South?

S2: Uh, yes... the Northern population and the higher curve can... represent the Southern population.

17) *S1 is talking about two graphs she has found:*

S1: The first one describes the movement of prices and the other one describes the movement of unemployment... between 1971 and 1983 in Europe. Price rose rapidly because the price of oil rose sharply in 1974.

S1: (*to S2*) Do you remermber that?

S2: Yes, I remember that in that year in Israel there were a war between Israel and Egitto and so the big... the first big petrol crisis and so I think that is for this motive that the prices and unemployment go up... grow.

18) *S1 has described a graph showing profits of a company:*

S2: Why do... did profits decrease between 1979 and 1980?

S1: Decrease?

S2: Yes.

S1: Uh...

T1: You have to invent something.

S1: Because there was few investment.

T1: Possible. Another possibility?

S1: Because the product was... era nuovo...

S2: The best quality.

T1: (*to S2*) You're saying something different. (*to S1*) Nuovo.

S3: New.

S1: New.

S2: Yes. Another possibility is because the product is better quality... best quality... a better quality.

S3: (*to S1*) For you why do the profits fall down between... (*T1 shakes head*) Decrease? Fall? (*T1 nods head.*) For you, why did the profits fall between 1983 and 1984?

S1: Because... because increase the rate of inflation.

T1: Because?

S1: The rate of inflation increase or increased the wages... wages increased.

S3: Is sufficient.

S2: Increase the cost.

T1: Pardon?

S2: Increased the cost... the cost increased.

T1: (*to S1*) Do you have a question? (*indicates S4*) Ask her a question.

S1: Why profits... no... why did profits remain constant between 1980 and 1982?

S4: The profits remained at the same level because... during these years was a very crisis of economic... a general crisis and therefore the businessmen don't invest their money.

3.5. Negotiating meaning

The data show that examinees were able to adjust output on the basis of feedback in the process of negotiating meaning. Here, for example, the students became the teachers, the subject, Italian football:

19) S1: I'm a football referee. Referee is a person a black uniform who controls football matches.

T1: A black uniform?
S1: Yes.
T2: Excuse me, but why is it black?
S1: Because the others players have another color... another uniform, for example, blue, red, all colors.
T1: But never black.
S2: There aren't any team that is wear... is wearing black and...
T2: Okay.
S1: For example, many years ago the number one of every team is... has... is wearing a black sweater and after... cioè now it's not possible to wear a black sweater for the number one of every team.
T1: Only the referee wears black.
S3: Yes, yes.
S1: But only now. Many years ago no.
T3: Who's the number one?
S1: The what?
T3: The number one. I don't understand. What does that mean?
T2: Is it the best player?
Chorus of S1, S2, S3: No, no, no, no.
S2: It's the... last... the... it's the players that play in a...
S1: In a particularly position.
T2: Okay.
S1: Do you understand?
T2: The most important position?
S3: The more back.
T1: Close to...
S2: The last player.
T1: the enemy's goal? The opponent's goal?
S1: Yes.
T1: Not the goalkeeper? The goalkeeper's the number one player?

S1: Yes.

S2: Yes.

S3: Yes.

The same collaboration in building discourse can be seen in exchanges between peers like the following.

20) *S1 is talking about a course he took to become a football referee:*

S1: I think that this experience is very interesting and influenced my life... because I understand many things. For example, many people go to the stadium to see a football match but don't understand the rule of games. I understand...

S3: All.

S1: I understand because there is violence in the stadium and uh...

S2: Do you think that people... So you think that people that go to the stadium know the... non mi ricordo...

S1: Rule... rules.

S2: rules of the play.

S1: No, I think that people know principal rules but not always. I'm sure because before to attend this course I often went to the stadium. I... I... I read always sport newspaper but later I understand that I know rules only after this course... only after to referee football matches but...

S2: Do you think that this violence is for... is...

S1: Caused.

S2: can... can be... can be because people don't know rules?

S1: But not always but... I think that this is important and... but I think that there are other causes. For example... for example...

S2: Because your team don't win.

S1: Yes, sometime ma... but I think always the newspaper write very things not... not... not good for the team...

for the fans. Do you understand?

S3: Yes.

3.6. Kinds of rhetorical acts

What kinds of rhetorical acts appeared in the data under study? First of all, the structure of the test itself required that students introduce their topics. A cursory survey of the various opening statements reveals a surprising range of styles and preferences:

21) — "I would like... about interesting and unusual experience which I had... last April... with my friends."

— "My subject is the relationship between inflation, privates, government and international relations."

— "My subject is more simple that hers and less interesting of his. Is the graph of... the graph show sales tea in USA from 1974 to 1980."

— "I would speak about my passion for animals."

— "My argument is different because it's a graph... but my graph show the inflation. I have drew it at home."

— "I should like to tell you about publicity because it is a very interesting topic... and it influences all our life."

— (*Examinee holds up graph.*) "This is a personal graph because this is the average trend of my vote... of examination."

— "I'd like to speak about a particular interest I have. Since a long time I carried on a special interest in reading."

— (*Examinee draws graph on board.*) "This graph shows the trend of the motor bike sales in connection with... their different uses."

— "One of the biggest interests in my life is my father's business."

— "I want to describe an adventure I had some years ago."

— "I can tell you, if you want, something about my work."

— "I'd like to spoke... speak about a dangerous experience. This experience I will remember always because is very dangerous."

— "I don't speak about my adventures but if Prof. (classroom teacher's name) is agree I would like to speak about one of my prevalent interests that is astrology."

— "My topic is the hunger in the world."

— "My argument is less serious than yours for I want to speak of my passion, which is the Juventus football club."

— "I would like to speak about a specific interest I have. I'm a football referee."

— "I have 3 graphs. How can I tell in English 'politica monetaria restrittiva'? A restrictive monetary policy. Is correct? "

In terms of language functions, examinees gave and asked for specific facts and for explanations and confirmations of what had been said; expressed likes and dislikes; asked for and gave opinions, expressing agreement and disagreement and defending a position; asked for permission to speak and apologized for interrupting; and reported on what other examinees had said. Their talks were based on description, narration, definition, reporting of facts, explanation of causal relationships, and comparison and contrast.

3.7. Effects of interacting with peers

Contrary to what might be expected of students who share the same native language, the data seem to indicate that interacting with peers during the test had a positive effect on examinees' English. They encouraged each other to speak, showed interest in most of what was said, and stimulated each other through their questions and comments. They were more than willing to help

their fellow examinees when they did not understand something, and their own presentations were obviously prepared with an audience of their peers in mind.

22) *S1 has been talking about the families who live on the agrarian community he visited:*

T1: Are they religious? Religious. Do they believe in some religion?

(*Silence*)

S2: Religion.

S1: Ah, religion.

S2: What kind?

S1: The experience was begin to the Lanza Del Vasto. Is a personage who knew Ghandi and is a community... so is a community which don't have a religion specific but respect all religion.

23) *S1 has just finished speaking about the problem of hunger in the world:*

T1: Did you march... Wasn't there a big demonstration, a march in the streets... this year... in the streets of Rome? There was a group of people who marched in the streets against hunger in the world. Did you participate?

S1: I don't understand.

T1: (*to S2*) Did you understand?

S2: Yes.

T1: (*to S3*) Did you understand?

S3: Yes.

T1: (*to S2 and S3*) Could you ask her?

S3: There is in Italy people who demonstrate for the people of...

S2: In the street of Rome.

S1: Yes, in Rome, yes.

S3: In Italy there is a group... a partito...

S2: Last week.

T1: A political party?

S3: who demonstrate in the parliament... radical...

T2: What's the party called?

S3: Radical.

S1: The partito radicale Italian.

S2: Last week I think was a demonstration in the street of Rome.

24) S1: I'm a football referee. Referee is a person a black uniform who controls football matches.

25) S1: In the poor countries... millions children starve in the world. "Starve" means that the children haven't to eat so die.

26) S1: Birds are animals who flying... flying animals. Warbling is the song of the birds. Canary is a little bird who lives in a cage. There aren't... canaries in... the canaries live only in captivity.

27) S1: And so a lot of blue collar and clerical worker... A clerical worker is a person who works as clerk or office worker.

Sometimes creating the text became a group effort where examinees added to and improved on each other's English. This was especially true when they worked together to explain something to the examiners. It is possible that motivation was increased because peers took the foreign language seriously, transforming a pro-forma test situation into an interesting game in which all participants were eager to play to the best of their ability.

28) *S1 is talking about the controversial issue of foreign players on Italian teams:*

S1: There is many peoples that say that the foreigner players are necessary in Italian sports because the show is better and there are many people say that the foreigner players don't give the possibility to Italian young people... to Italian young players to go out.

T1: To go out?

S1: Si, emergere.

T1: I don't understand.

S1: Venir fuori.
T1: I don't understand. Can you explain it?
S1: To go out... Don't give the possibility to Italian young players to...
S2: To play.
S1: to...
S2: To play in a club.
S1: to begin... became champion... champion.
T1: Okay.

29) *S1 is talking about the course he took to become a football referee:*

S1: Before to attend university I lived in Latina and I took an examination. This course is concern theoretical lessons and after I took an oral and a write examination. And after I took a very selective check-in. Do you understand check-in?
S2: Yes.
T1: No, I don't.
S1: No?
T1: Check-in?
S1: No, selective visit.
T1: Medical exam?
S2: Check-up.
S1: Medical.
T1: Ah, check-up.
S2: Check-up.
S1: Check-up.

3.8. Participation and motivation

The testing format itself undoubtedly favored examinee participation also. In fact, making examinees responsible for content not only ensured that they would have something to say to the

others but even put them in the enviable position of being able to tell the examiners something they did not know.

30) *S1 has chosen to talk about a graph showing steel production and sales in Italy:*

S1: At the moment the steel sales is decreasing.

S2: Rapidly, I think.

S1: Rapidly because there are 4... 5 important causes. The first is the inflation. The second is the Normative no. 58 of the Community Europea... the European Community.

T2: What's Normative 58?

S1: No. 58.

T2: What is that?

S1: Is a normative who want to sell...

T3: Is it a law?

S1: Yes, is a law in the European...

S2: It's a common law.

T1: Common Market law.

S2: Yes, Common Market law.

S3: CEE.

T1: EEC.

S2: In Italian it's the contrary.

S1: This normative wants to fall...

(*T1 shakes head.*)

S1: to fall...

T1: A different word.

S1: To go down.

T1: No, another word.

S2: Decrease.

S1: to decreasing the production steel because in Europe is very very big. Italy can decreasing 5 million tons in this year.

T1: You mean there's too much steel that's produced in Europe?

S1: Yes.

31) *S1 has been talking about the two most important ways in which the government can raise money:*

T1: What are the two ways? You said one is selling bonds.

S1: Yes.

T1: And the other way?

S1: Printed money.

T1: Oh, printing money.

S1: But printing money make high level of inflation because in a stationary economy if there is an equation between increasing in quantity of money and increasing in price... they will explain with this equation. (*S1 gets up and writes equation on blackboard; pointing to figures in the equation*) This is the level of inflation and this is the increase in quantity of money. If the economy is stationary the gross national product can't increase in a short time so an increase in this quantity...

T1: (*referring to the equation*) "t" is the money supply.

S1: Yes... has this effect on the level of inflation...immediately.

On the whole, motivation was high during the test. The examinee who wanted to describe a dangerous experience he had when a friend and he discovered hand grenades left over from the Second World War in the basement of their school insisted on making every detail of the episode accurate, often struggling to find just the right word to express what he wanted to say. The examinee who described his love for animals and the one who wanted to share the very personal experience he had had living on a commune were only the more striking examples of the genuine involvement and strong desire to communicate which characterized almost all of the examinees. Those who chose to speak on subjects related to economics and business were eager to show off what they knew and took their own presentations as well as those given by others on related topics very seriously indeed.

32) *S1 is talking about Gross National Product:*

S1: There are two different reasons because it can change. GNP can change for... can change because prices go up and because real production... because physic production increase. Nominal GNP measure each on two different reason. Real production consider only the physical production. Nominal GNP considered the real and the nominal and then also inflation.

S2: Do you think that for economist is most important to study real GNP or nominal GNP?

S1: I think that important... the two different... but real GNP is more important than nominal because real GNP show the production in a country and this for example can show only increase in prices... can show... not show the real production.

S2: Yes.

One examinee, who had not applied himself well during the English course itself, gave a remarkably sincere account of his past immaturity and showed a growing awareness of the commitment that university studies demand of the student.

33) S1: I think that my personality is changed because now I don't think always to play tennis, to play football, to go to the cinema with my friend, but now I want... I must study because this university is strong.

On several occasions the examiner had to end the exchange to keep the test from lasting too long. Frequently examinees wanted to ask a final question or make a final comment.

34) *S1 has been talking about his passion for literature:*

T1: Let's stop here.

S1: One thing. I'd like to report a short but expressive passage of Flaubert: "I read not for learning but for living." And in fact this is my opinion. The real function of reading is a useful mean of living. Is the central point of my opinion.

T1: It helps you to live a richer life.

S2: I think that the literature represents our past. It's true

that the modern life don't have enough time for reading but reading represent a connection with our past for everybody, not only that study in literature faculty... for everybody.

3.9. Self correction

Second language learners' ability to edit their own speech, sometimes referred to as "the monitor", is often viewed as a source of creative activity in the internal processing of language output (see Dulay and Burt 1977).[1] If this is so then the ability to self-correct is indicative of proficiency in a language and should be taken into consideration when evaluating an individual's performance on a test. During the test under study here, self-correction was sometimes spontaneous.

35) *S1 is describing a graph on inflation:*

S1: There are two different Gross National Product, real and nominal. The difference between this curve show the inflation during the year. In fact, in Italy when inflation is.... when inflation was less... for example during the 1960 and 1970, real production and nominal production were almost the same.

At other times self-correction was prompted. The examiner nudged examinees to get them to think about the form what they were saying should take.

36) *S1 is describing a graph which shows GNP:*

S1: After 1979 they

T1: The GNP?

S1: began... it began to fall.

37) *S1 has decided to do another examinee's horoscope:*

[1] Other researchers who discuss the significance of the language learner's ability to monitor speech are: Bialystok (1978) and Rivers (1983).

S1: (*to S2*) When was you born?
T1: Pardon?
S1: When was you born?
T1: Pardon?
S1: When was... were you born?

Since a certain amount of time had been spent during the course itself on how to ask a question, the examiner who was also the classroom teacher insisted at times on the correct interrogative form.

38) *S1 has been describing a graph showing company profits:*
S2: Why this level profits in... between 1979... no.... 78 to 1980 decrease?
T1: Repeat the question.
S2: Why the level
T1: Question.
S2: Why do... did profits decrease between 1979 and 1980?

If an examinee was not able to provide the correct form, even when given time to do so, then one of the others was called upon. In fact, as happens also in the classroom, those who were listening were often better able to use what they knew than the one whose English was being directly challenged.

39) *S1 has chosen to talk about his hometown, Catania:*
S2: Your family lives in Catania?
T1: No.
S2: Where do you live your family?
T1: Try again.
S2: Do you live your family?
T1: (*to S3*) What's the question?
S3: Does your family live in Catania?

3.10. Making the examinees responsible for content

Teachers are often afraid that if students are allowed to choose

the topic and given time to think about it beforehand they will come to the examination with a memorized text which is not their own that they will recite in such an imperfect and mechanical way as to render it virtually incomprehensible and useless even as a springboard for a more natural exchange. The teacher/examiner who designed the test under study here was confident that the students involved were able to take on the primary responsibility for demonstrating their ability to function in English. During the language course itself these students were given a certain amount of autonomy. They were encouraged to express their own ideas, to contruct their own sentences, and to experiment with the language in order to learn to manipulate it better. Furthermore, they were encouraged to correct their own errors and to look to their peers for help rather than referring constantly to the teacher as the only source of knowledge about the language. With this kind of language preparation and supported by the guidelines, which were discussed in class, during the test almost all of the students spoke about something they felt knowledgeable about, expressed themselves in simple English in keeping with their own level of linguistic competence, and showed a real desire to communicate with the others. And there was evidence of creative construction even during the "prepared" part of the test where examinees were free to introduce their topics in any way they chose.

40) *S1 is describing a graph showing the trend of motor bike sales according to their different uses:*

S1: The third curve show the secondary use. The secondary use is... depend... is a consequence of the new uses of the motor bike, like scrambling or trial... in leisure activvities.

In only two or three cases did examinees feel so insecure about their English that they either repeated something that had been done during the course or delivered a monologue in a way that invited no interruptions and no response. With these examinees, as with some of the others, it turned out that their English was better when they were reacting spontaneously to what someone else had said. The personality factor obviously looms large

in foreign language learning and testing. A perfectionist attitude can block spontaneity, and a negative image of oneself as a language learner can set up a barrier to understanding. Placed in the more natural communicative context of a peer group discussion even these examinees were able to perform. (In one other case a "quiet" student turned out to be much more fluent and sophisticated in his English than the others so that he naturally tended to address what he had to say to the examiners rather than to his peers, who had difficulty following him.)

3.11. The examiner's role

If what an examinee was saying began sounding too much like a textbook, there were a number of things the examiner could do to make it more relevant to the other examinees.

41) *S1 has been talking about astrology in an abstract theoretical way:*

T1: Instead of continuing with an explanation, why don't you ask them something about themselves, something to do with astrology?

S1: Okay. (*to S2*) When was you born?.

It was also part of the examiner's role to create the basis for a discussion by checking to make sure the other examinees were following what was being said.

42) *S1 wants to talk about work experience he had one summer on the island of Jersey:*

T1: (*to S2 and S3*) Excuse me, do you know where Jersey is? Did you understand?

S1: You know Jersey? It's the English island in the Channel.

T1: There are two islands.

S1: Yes, Jersey and Guernsey.

S2: Island?

T1: Islands... in the Channel near England.

S1: Behind the Normandia... Brittany.
T1: Brittany. It's across from Britanny?
S1: Yes.
T1: Is it closer to France or to England?
S1: France.
T1: But it's British.
S1: Yes.

43) *S1 is going to talk about working in his father's furniture store:*
T1: (*to S2, S3 and S4*) Did you know his father had a furniture store?

The examiner, as a kind of moderator-facilitator, could help to keep the others involved.

44) *S1 is describing a graph showing investments:*
T1: (*referring to the graph*) Why are investments rising now? (*to S2*) What do you think?

45) *S1 has reached the high point in his story of a dangerous experience:*
T1: What happened then? (*to S2*) What do you think happened?

46) *S1 is going to talk about her job:*
T1: (*to S2, S3 and S4*) Have any of you ever had a job? Have you had work experience?

47) *S1 has been talking about the pros and cons of having foreign players on Italian teams:*
T1: (*To S1*) Are you going to give your opinion?
S1: Yes.
T1: (*referring to the others examinees*) Would you like to ask their opinion... before you give yours?

Although examinees were encouraged to manage their own turn taking, when the examiner picked up on any hesitation, con-

fusion or curiosity on the part of an examinee who was listening, she was willing to intervene with "Would you like to ask something?" or "Do you have a question for her?", thus allowing the other examinees the time and space to enter in. Where examinees had a more complicated graph they could not put on the blackboard, the examiner suggested they explain it to the examinees sitting next to them: "Could you see if he can follow it because he's on the same side as you. See if he can follow it."

Examinees were constantly reminded that the examination was meant to be a kind of Round Table discussion and that they should make sure the others understood everything they said. They were seated in a semi-circle across from the examiners and were occasionally asked to move their chairs closer together or further apart as needed to facilitate communication with their peers. The blackboard space to the right of the examiners was available to anyone who wanted to use it. For some examinees the tendency was strong to speak to and for the examiners, but once the group began to function, it had a natural momentum all its own.

4. EVALUATING THE TEST

4.1. Oller's criteria

How does the oral test described here measure up? Does it qualify as a pragmatic test? Does it meet the standard testing criteria of validity, reliability and practicality and does it have instructional value? Was it successful as an elicitation procedure and were the errors contained in the data representative of the groups being tested?

First of all, let us return to Oller's definition of a pragmatic test. It must involve meaningful sequence (as opposed to disconnected sentences) and it must require the examinee to express and interpret information in words about experience. The test in question was designed and carried out with these two criteria in mind. Examinees were expected to process discourse and were consistently called upon to relate what they heard and said to their own knowledge and experience of reality. They were repeatedly made aware of the close connection between language forms and meaning.

Oller's (1979) statements with reference to tests of learners' ability to write seem particularly appropriate to oral testing if we substitute the words "speaking", "speaker" and "listener" for "writing", "writer" and "reader":

> ... to the degree that a task fails or succeeds in eliciting a highly motivated performance, it will probably fail or succeed in eliciting valid information about the (writing) [1] ability of the examinee... (Writing) tasks are pragmatic if they relate to fullfledged contexts of discourse that are known to the (writer) and that the (writer) is attempting to make known to the (reader) (p. 384).

The fact that examinees were highly motivated to communicate during much of the test described here may be an indication that the large and varied language sample that was obtained is

[1] Parentheses added.

in many ways representative of their ability to process oral English. In a sense, the fact that examinees knew something about their topics and had chosen to share what they knew with the others made the task a very real one in that it reflected a normal communicative situation where people speak to one another about what they know.

4.2. Standard testing criteria

Next, let us examine the test to determine its validity, reliability, practicality and instructional value. Validity refers to whether or not a test actually measures what it is supposed to measure. In this case, there was no distinction made between what examinees were asked to do during the test and what they might be expected to do in real-life discussion of a topic about which at least one of them was knowledgeable. Reliability refers to how consistently a test produces similar results on different occasions under similar circumstances. According to Oller (1979), "Questions of reliability have to do with how consistently a test does what it is supposed to do, and thus cannot be strictly separated from validity questions" (p. 4). To the extent that the test actually measures examinees' ability to process language in a real communicative situation, to that extent it should give comparable results when repeated in a similar situation.

The practicality of a test refers to the cost in terms of material, time and effort that it requires. This includes the preparation, administration, scoring and interpretation of the test. In this respect our test seems very economical indeed. To a large extent examinees provided the content for their own examinations and participated at their own initiative. The test was in sense like a performance organized by the students at the end of a year of rehearsals in class. On the whole, testing took no longer that it normally would, with an average of three examinees an hour, and testing was less fragmented with examinees remaining in the same group to discuss three successive topics. (As was mentioned before, third-year students were asked to talk for only five minutes, leaving five minutes for discussion or ten minutes total per topic so that

three examinees could be tested in approximately thirty minutes' time.)

The examiners played an important part in the testing. They set the tone for the test by taking what examinees said seriously. They were rigorous in their demands that language be real, logical and appropriate. They were skilful in testing examinees' capacity for self-correction. Moreover, their ability to act as moderators/facilitators became crucial when examinees were less successful in interacting with each other. However, it might also be said that these skills are those needed by a good classroom teacher and require no additional training. Scoring was done immediately after each group had finished. Since groups involved from two to four examinees with most groups made up of three, this sometimes meant making a note during the test of something related to a particular examinee's performance. For the most part, however, this was not necessary and testers had a definite global impression of each examinee's English at the end of each group exam. Since they were based on the same criteria and made by experienced language teachers, these global evaluations were almost always the same or very close. Oller speaks of the technical difficulties of quantification of scoring in pragmatic testing: "...there is no escape from subjective judgment in the interpretation of normal expression in natural language" (1979: 392). He recommends that the test be scored principally for meaning, including contextual appropriateness. He maintains that trained and untrained judges alike listen for the communicative effect of speech and that examinees are consistently ranked the same even when the specific scores assigned differ. His assertion that experienced examiners who have tested together tend to be highly reliable in their scoring supports the findings reported here.

The instructional value of a test pertains to the ease with which it can be fitted into an educational program. The test in question would be suitable for any number of language learning situations where the focus is on using language for communication. It seems particularly appropriate for the system of open oral examinations characteristic of Italian schools and universities. Finally, as an elicitation device the test was quite succesful in that it pro-

vided a large body of language data which exhibited all of the most common errors typically made by learners at that level of languge proficiency.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Recent research on second language acquisition

In recent years research on learning a second or foreign language has focused more and more closely on the language learners themselves, or on what language learners do when they attempt to learn a language. Most researchers now agree that exposure to input is often not sufficient to bring about learning, particularly in the case of adult language learners (Larsen-Freeman 1983). "What goes in comes out" has proved to be an overly simplistic explanation of a highly complex process. Indeed, it has been found that language learners are far from being passive absorbers of all Native Speaker input. On the contrary, they have certain input preferences, that is, they decide which aspects of the language to pay attention to at any given moment and which Target Language speakers to take for models (Beebe as reported in Larsen-Freeman 1983). It appears that at a certain stage in acquiring a language, learners can even overrule or ignore aspects of the target input to which they are exposed, with the result that some errors become fossilized (Kellerman as reported in Larsen-Freeman 1983). The fact that the Interlanguage spoken by those in the process of learning a language contains forms which are not encountered in the input to which they are exposed is further evidence of the active role learners play in their own learning (Zobl as reported in Larsen-Freeman 1983). Learners are even responsible to some extent for the quantity and quality of the input they receive; for example, some learners will use social strategies to initiate or sustain a language exchange with a speaker of the Target Language (Rubin 1984) or make requests in the classroom that will trigger the language information they need (Brown as reported in Larsen-Freeman 1983).

The active role that language learners play in their own learning can also be seen from the variety of learning strategies that they use. While some learning strategies are dysfunctional for all learners, even the learning strategies of successful learners will differ to some extent. For example, some learners are more intuitive in their approach to learning while others tend to rely on

analytical skills (Rubin 1984). Part of the teacher's role is to help learners identify which strategies work best for them and to suggest alternatives to those strategies which have proved inefficient. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, for teachers to determine how each individual student learns best or to follow each one through the complex process of learning a language, it is imperative that learners be taught to help themselves. Looked at another way, helping students to learn means helping them to build on what they already know; and since each student's knowledge differs, the students themselves have to be able to assess their own knowledge in order to build on it. By becoming aware of what they know — about their own learning process, about language (both their own and the foreign language) and about the communication process in general — students can learn to take charge of their own learning. The teacher then, in addition to ensuring exposure to appropriate input, must become an expert in training learners. Self-direction is essential to all learning and language learners can ultimately become the best judges of how they learn. Learners who use effective learning strategies and are aware of what they do will be able to direct their own learning. This means not only that they can learn better inside the classroom but also that they can continue to learn outside the classroom on their own.

5.2. The post-modern era in testing

What is the place of language testing in this view of language learning which recognizes and encourages the autonomy of the learner? Is it even possible to create a tool which will measure the complex phenomenon of language and which will be appropriate for use with different kinds of learners? The testing procedure reported on here can hardly presume to accomplish such an awesome task. Perhaps it can best be viewed as an offspring of some of the recent research on language learning discussed above. In what he refers to as the post-modern era in testing, noted testing expert Bernard Spolsky speaks of an ethnographic approach to testing where the tester is a participant observer (Spolsky as summarized in Shohamy 1984). In this test in fact

the tester's role was often that of a participant observer. At other times, however, it resembled that of a good classroom teacher, who encourages succesful learner strategies: clarification/verification, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, monitoring of speech, etc. (Rubin 1984). Although a test of this kind will not tell us everything about what leaners do not know, it may still give us a fairly accurate picture of what they do know how to do in a language at a given point in time. But perhaps its greatest merit lies in its contribution to the promotion of learner awareness and autonomy, which are the hallmarks of all successful learning.

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